MODERATOR'S REPORT
209TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY
JUNE 14, 1997

This is an extraordinary church. I have loved it all my life and after a year of service as Moderator, visiting its congregations, presbyteries, synods, GA Mission programs in this country and abroad, its colleges and seminaries and networks, I love it even more. And I am happy to report to you that in spite of what you might read about us in the press - or in the newspapers printed by various parts of our own family who want us to be different and who hold us up for criticism, in spite of that, I'm happy to report that we are a strong and vital and creative and mission minded and faithful church of Jesus Christ and that there is much about which to be hopeful and positive and deeply grateful. And if that is news to you, you might want to try reading a different newspaper, or at least expanding your horizons a little bit. May I suggest the brand new Presbyterians, "Being Faithful to Jesus Christ" which we are introducing at this Assembly, and which you may receive in your home, four times a year, and which will tell you every three months, good news about your Church.

Thank you for the honor of serving as Moderator of the General Assembly. It has been a great privilege, an exciting and exhausting adventure and I shall never forget it.

My heart is full of gratitude to Moderators who have preceded me and shown me how to do it. I think particularly of Bill Laws who, in 1970, led us with grace, fairness and conviction in stressful times.

And I want to thank the people with whom I have been privileged to work:

- Gay Mothershed, our gracious Vice Moderator.
- The General Assembly staff at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville, particularly Valerie Small and Diane Dulaney.
- Cliff Kirkpatrick,our distinguished Stated Clerk,and personal friend.
- Frank Diaz and Youngil Cho who have led this year with stability and courage.
- Executives of Board of Pensions, Foundation, PILP, Publishing Corporation, who have established a new style of collaboration and cooperative leadership.
- The General Assembly Senior Staff , Eunice, Curtis, Gwen and Bob, who serve our church with great dedication.
- The Commissioners to the 208th General Assembly who elected me;
- The people of Fourth Presbyterian Church who allowed me to be away and supported me with encouragement and prayers, and who have thrived this year without me.
- My circle of friends from Chicago, Columbus, and Altoona, PA, who have been with us all year and have come to be with us today.
- Sue, my wife, my children and son-in-law, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, whose love and support sustained me all year long.

I have been pleasantly surprised, every single day at how much affection and pride Presbyterian people have for their church. The Moderator receives it every time people rise and

applaud. But all Moderators know that the affection is not for us personally, but for the office and what it symbolizes: the history, unity and mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

I have received a lot of mail: much of it expressing anger, pain, concern about the issue which has dominated our life this year. But, also encouraging letters, letters expressing the hope and love of Presbyterian people.

This one arrived on December 15th:

"Dear Mr. Moderator,

When things get frustrating and discouraging, please remember that people you don't even know are earnestly praying for you and for our church. What a cloud of witnesses!

May God give you grace, strength and wisdom for your office.

In Christ,

Jim Gooch and the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Corsicana, Texas"

Presbyterian congregations are worshipping faithfully, baptizing their infants, teaching the children, standing with their young people, learning and growing in faith and engaging in mission where they are with unique faithfulness. Presbyterian congregations are feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, counseling the disturbed, advocating for the oppressed every where.

And they are doing it with consistent joy from Fifth Avenue Church in Manhattan to John Knox Church in a racially mixed neighborhood in Los Angeles, from First Church downtown Atlanta to Community Presbyterian Church, Millwood, Washington.

At our best we Presbyterians have a twinkle in our eye. It's theological for us. We know about grace, we know that none of us deserves to get into the kingdom. We're in because God has invited us in – so there is an element of joyful playfulness at the heart of the enterprise at our best.

At San Rafael, California, Norm Pott used me as a prop in his children's sermon. He told about the cross and invited the children to give the Moderator a "high-five" and then not wash their hands for the rest of the day.

Fairlington Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, invited me to preach for the church's 50th Anniversary. Now the Moderator receives many more Sunday invitations than he/she can accommodate, so difficult decisions must be made. Sometimes the invitations are creative in order to influence the decision making process. Fairlington's, for instance, was three pages long, and said "Mr. Moderator, believing like you do that "church matters," we, the congregation of the Fairlington Presbyterian Church hope and pray you will honor our request and come and speak to our congregation." Attached was a petition signed by 108 members of the

church. Well, who could resist that? Jan Edmiston and Fred Lyons are co-pastors and as Jan was introducing me in worship she said. "Mr. Moderator we have a confession to make. You know that petition with all the names on it? Well, if you looked closely you'll see that the handwriting is very similar for many of them. After we sent it I was looking at a copy of it and I noticed that. I noticed that there were names on that list of people I know were out of town on the Sunday we passed it around. And then I noticed names of people who used to be members but have moved. And then I noticed the names of a few members of Fairlington Presbyterian Church whose funerals I've had recently. I was horrified. I called the Elder in charge and she said, "yes, as a matter of fact, we didn't get many signatures – so the committee signed for people we thought might like a moderator visit... Same for the ones who died. We chose the ones we thought might like it. Besides the Moderator's from Chicago, he'll understand that. That's how they elect alderman, isn't it?"

I have visited 72 of our Presbyteries and even though we love to complain about Presbytery meetings, I'm pleased to report to you that our Presbyteries are functioning effectively and nurturing community. I traveled to the Presbytery of South Dakota in the dead of winter, the tiny plane circled the field several times before deciding to land on the snow packed runway. On the ground I discovered a Presbytery of 70 congregations, mostly small, scattered all over the state – and those commissioners were happy to be together. We had a great roast beef dinner for the occasion. I'm not sure they weren't pulling my leg a little but they told me our dinner was walking around in the pasture earlier that same day. While I was there, the Executive Presbyter Richard Melin told me what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) means to the people of South Dakota. It was a rough winter with huge, disastrous snow accumulation. 100,000 cattle died in South Dakota, many small ranches went bankrupt. Almost all ranches lost fences, barns, heavy equipment. Snow is a benign disaster, Rick explained. It looks pretty, but people here are desperate and alone. And grateful for an immediate grant from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), One Great Hour of Sharing to start the relief process and for the 20 Presbytery volunteers from the Synod of the Trinity who traveled to South Dakota to help rebuild.

I am happy to report to you the health and vitality of our seminaries – I've visited and spoke with students at every one of them. Our community of scholars is one of our most precious treasures. Our Presidents and faculties care deeply about the church and their role in educating leadership for the future.

Our colleges and universities are asking the critical question of how they can maintain a more important and closer relationship with the church and I am greatly encouraged that there is a new day for our ministry in higher education.

And New Church Development, we know the New Church Development is the strategy which will allow us to obey our Lord's mandate and at the same time to take seriously our membership loss. We're thinking about NCD, and we're doing it, and we need more - more plans, strategies and resources

We are an old church. I've brought the greetings of the whole church to congregations celebrating anniversaries - 50th, 100th, 200th, 250th, 300th. We have congregations on islands off the coast of South Carolina that are almost 325 years old. This is the 209th General Assembly, but we were here a century before that. Our Presbyterian Scots-Irish ancestors were among the first settlers in the new world and they brought with them their Calvinist suspicion of authority and hierarchies and monarchies and their insistence that individuals have God given rights and responsibilities for their governance. They provided the philosophic/theological rationale for revolution, so much so that William Pitt, on the floor of parliament, referred to the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord as that "Presbyterian Revolt."

After Independence was won, we Presbyterians helped to write a constitution and build a nation and because our theology is Reformed we expressed ourselves on all the matters of concern in the society and brought into our courts and meetings and worship services the issues that were vexing and troubling and sometimes dividing the nation: slavery, war, economics, poverty, race.

We are an old church.

And we are a big church. There are still 2.7 million of us. And the polls indicate that perhaps twice that number think of themselves as Presbyterians. There are 11,400 congregations, 68 colleges and universities and we are in mission in 87 countries.

And we are a distinguished Missionary church. Presbyterian mission activity began in the middle of the last century. Presbyterian missionaries were often on the field first and always with their Reformed concern for evangelism and social justice, establishing churches but also everywhere schools, colleges, hospitals.

The Moderator brings greetings and encouragement to our Mission personnel and our mission partners on behalf of the General Assembly and so we were privileged this year on your behalf to visit:

- The Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba
- The Presbyterian Churches in Brazil, Chile and Argentina
- The Waldensians in Rome
- The Vatican Secretariat for Ecumenical Relations, bringing greetings to Pope John Paul II
- The Reformed Church of Hungary
- The Reformed Church of Croatia
- The Presbyterian Church of Korea and the Korean Presbyterian Church

Because of the faithful and courageous witness of missionaries 100 years ago there are today thriving indigenous, partner Presbyterian Churches all over the world.

There are more Presbyterians in Kenya than there are in our nation.

There are strong Presbyterian Churches and hospitals in the new Republic of the Congo and the Sudan.

In Cuba – our Presbyterian partners are now free to live as a church in a new way with amazing results. Churches are full – bursting at the seams. The Seminary at Matanzas is full of bright, committed young students and the new President, Ofelia Ortega, will be our preacher Tuesday night at the Ecumenical Worship Service.

In Brazil – the dynamic Presbyterian Churches are moving toward reunion as they are in Chile – a development that will greatly enhance their evangelical witness in those two critically important nations.

In Argentina, a group of 15 wonderful young Presbyterian young adult Volunteers in Mission traveled, some for hundreds of miles, to meet with the Moderator and to hear a word from home. They live on a shoe string so I bought their dinner - I hope you approve.

In Croatia we spent time with our mission workers in Osijek, a beautiful old city that sustained serious damage in the recent war. We support a seminary in Osijek and Agape, a refugee resettlement project. We visited a feeding center – the refugee problem in Croatia is horrendous. Osijek is flooded with Bosnian Muslim refugees, Serbians, and Croatian Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, all of whom have suffered ethnic cleansing, destruction of homes and entire villages, and who have literally no where to go. At the feeding center I met the workers and the people lined up to receive a loaf of bread and a bowl of soup ladled into whatever container they brought: jars, cans, pots and pans, even a scrub bucket. A little self-consciously, I ladled soup for a while and then as we left a Muslim woman asked who we were. Our translator told her we were Presbyterians from the U.S.A. She took my hands in hers and with tears flowing freely she told the translator to tell me that her husband and sons were executed – ethnic cleansing. Her daughter was raped and disappeared. Her home was destroyed, she had nothing. "Tell them – I thank God for them", she said. "Tell them that without this help, this food we would starve."

On Sunday I was invited to preach at the Reformed Church of Vincovsci where the Bishop of the Reformed Church of Croatia, Endre Langh is Pastor. That little church sustained a direct mortar hit in the bombardments that virtually destroyed most of the public buildings in Vincovsci: hospital, museum, schools, the Roman Catholic Cathedral was leveled. So the Orthodox Cathedral was blown up in retribution. The little Reformed Church was hit too, the people had evacuated. But now they are back. A grant from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has helped repair the building, a small sanctuary and attached manse. On the Sunday after Easter the church was crowded with men, women and children to see and say thank you to the American Moderator. What an experience, to be in that tiny pulpit one week after standing in the high Gothic pulpit of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago – totally safe – in the midst of the secure comfort and affluence we take so for granted – and to preach about the hope of the

resurrection and to assist Bishop Langh by breaking and serving the bread of communion and see the tears in the eyes of our Croatian brothers and sisters, tears of gratitude for the church and for the hope of the Gospel.

In Korea I brought your greetings to congregations, colleges, seminaries, denominations, staff members, and at the end of a 1,000 meter tunnel, 75 yards underground, beneath the DMZ at the 38th Parallel, to the surprised South Korean sergeant on guard. The Presbyterian story in Korea is amazing and all of us were deeply grateful for the strength and faithfulness of the Presbyterian church and the courage of our missionaries who arrived there in 1888. Our General Assembly staff has been to North Korea where a major crisis is occurring before our eyes. But there are, we know, 500 Presbyterian congregations in North Korea, all but two functioning without a building, meeting in homes – South Korean Presbyterians have family members in those churches who they have not seen for 47 years. They pray for reunification. They help, in every way they can think of to send food and desperately needed supplies. If there is hope for a peaceful future in North Korea it is in part because of the church that transcends the 38th Parallel.

We are an old church and a big church and a distinguished mission church. We are a diverse church and we are, all the world knows, a church deeply divided over an issue which is very clear to some of us, and for many of us very complex. When the vote on Amendment B was taken on Friday of the 208th General Assembly, I knew that in the Spring of 1997 the Presbyteries would vote and there was coming a day when a significant part of this wonderful family was going to be deeply disappointed, hurt, angry, and wondering whether or not there was any longer a place for them in the family. I knew that it would be painful – because I have good and trusted friends on both sides of this issue. We did not know, of course, which side was going to be happy and which would be unhappy: only that someone was going to be very disappointed.

I am glad to report that the conversation throughout our family went well. We can be grateful for the respect, civility, courtesy and love which characterized the Amendment B debate in our Presbyteries. We did something important, I believe, in the way we talked with one another.

And now, you are the General Assembly which inherits the process and the decision.

I will tell you that I have heard from a lot of people about this issue. I have received every day for the past three months, long and painful letters, from faithful, life long Presbyterians announcing their resignation from the church, from gay and lesbian Presbyterian elders, deacons, trustees, church members, Sunday school teachers, letters from parents of gay and lesbian Presbyterians who cannot believe what our church has done to their children, and want me to explain. I have heard from people representing one side of the debate who are furious with me for not condemning the decision and giving public voice to my personal opposition.

And I have heard from people asking me to lead the implementation and enforcement of Amendment B, furious because I have said that "enforcement" is the wrong word and wrong

concept: very angry because I said that there are many churches which will have a very difficult time changing their behavior, which has historically been more inclusive than this provision allows, my own among them.

And in the midst of it all I have heard many, many voices – worried, fearful – saying please, please God, let's not divide or destroy this church. I have heard voices on both sides saying we do not intend witch hunts or mass resignations, we do not intend to turn our beloved church into a battle field of acrimony, accusation and ecclesiastic litigation.

We need more of those voices now. The conversation will go on. Some believe it is resolved. It is not. It is not resolved in the congregation I serve. We must, I humbly suggest, like it or not, continue the conversation. Churches and individuals who cannot implement Amendment B, must work to change it. Churches and individuals who rejoice over its passage must help churches and individuals who must out of conscience and conviction and theology and Biblical authority, disagree and dissent.

I hope that somehow in the next week, you will find a way to move us ahead. Seventy years ago, when the church was almost coming apart over the Modernist/Fundamentalist debate, the General Assembly created a commission to consider all the implications of the action and to preserve the unity of the church. Perhaps we need such a commission now.

What we need, I know, is God's spirit; the gentle, reconciling Holy Spirit. What we need, I know is one another. What we need is Presbyterian Christians with enough grace in their hearts to reach across the gaps and fissures and divides in this great church and hold on to one another for dear life.

That Commission, back in 1925, produced a report which I have read and reread carefully. In that report they said some important things about who we are as a people. Let me read a few sentences to you. They have encouraged and inspired me during this year.

> "Presbyterianism is a great body of belief, but it is more than a belief; it is also a tradition, a controlling sentiment. The ties that bring us to it are not of the mind only; they are ties of the heart as well. There are people who, despite variant opinions, can never be at home in any other communion. They were born into the Presbyterian Church. They love its name, its order and its great distinctive teachings. In its fellowship they have a precious inheritance from their forbears. Their hearts bow at its altars and cherish a just pride in its noble history. Attitudes and sentiments like these are treasures which should not be undervalued hastily, not cast aside lightly."
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> Special Commission of 1925
> Members 138th General Assembly (1926) p. 62-87

Commissioners to the 209th General Assembly, thank you for your service to our church. Help us see the way ahead. Cherish this precious church, its name, its order, its distinctive teachings, its fellowship, its ties of the heart.

There is so much for which to be grateful and hopeful. We stand together on the Common Ground of the Gospel, ground carefully and lovingly cultivated by those who have gone before us. We live in a household of faith carefully and lovingly constructed. May we be good stewards of the gift and may we at this Assembly and in the days ahead strengthen and cultivate and build and hand the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) whole, strong, faithful, to our children and our children's children.

Thank you for the privilege of allowing me to be your Moderator. Madam Vice Moderator, this is my report.